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Why do women vote for women: an exploration of decision criteria in the Australian 2010 federal election

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Why do women vote for women: an exploration of decision criteria in the Australian 2010 federal election

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore if women who are in positions of leadership are influenced by gender when voting for a party led by a female candidate and if perceptions of the media's portrayal of a woman candidate influences the voting preferences of women leaders.

Design/methodology/approach - The paper reports the results of an online survey of women leaders to provide a pre-election analysis about how they would vote and what was influencing their vote for Gillard, if they chose to vote for her. Data were analysed using Content Analysis and Descriptive Statistical Analysis.

Findings - Although gender does influence the vote of women leaders for a woman candidate, they use different decision criteria to influence their voting preferences of a female candidate, of which the woman candidate's views and priorities play a major part.

Research limitations/implications - The small sample size was not statistically representative and the data were self-reported and not validated post voting. A random and larger sample is required as well as further research comparing how Abbott was portrayed in the media and how men would vote for the party leaders.

Practical implications - The paper highlights that female candidates need to clearly assert their views and priorities during an election campaign and foreshadows women's evaluation of Gillard's achievements for women, in the next election.

Originality/value - Based in a unique time in Australia's political history which led to a woman being elected prime minister of a minority government and it explores how women in leadership perceived and reacted to the electoral environment at the time.

Keywords

do, women, vote, exploration, election, why, decision, 2010, federal, australian, criteria

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Why do Women Vote for Women: An exploration of decision criteria in the Australian 2010 Federal Election

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About The Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW)

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The Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW) was launched in August 2000 by Dr Diann Rodgers-Healey. It aims to transform at an individual and collective level, mindsets, attitudes and capacity related to leadership. ACLW aims to empower women leaders and emerging women leaders through a suite of focused resources, analysis of theory and concepts related to leadership, and coaching and mentoring for women on a range of professional and personal advancement issues. ACLW's Flagship Awards Program began in 2006 to recognise women and men, organisations both public and corporate for their initiatives to advance the empowerment of women. To assist women globally to develop their leadership, ACLW partners with Non Government Organisations (NGO) to raise funds for programs designed to develop leadership capacity in women.

Abstract:

A pre-election analysis of the factors influencing women's vote in the 2010 Australian federal election explored if women who are in positions of leadership are influenced by gender when voting for a party led by a female candidate. It also considered if perceptions of the media's portrayal of a woman candidate influences the voting preferences of women leaders. The findings indicated that women leaders will, in the majority, vote for a woman candidate first and foremost because of her views and priorities, policies, leadership style and achievements, and only after these considerations, because of her gender. This study found that although gender does influence the vote of women leaders for a woman candidate, they use different decision criteria to influence their voting preferences of a female candidate, of which the woman candidate's views and priorities play a major part. They also use different criteria to assess a female and male candidate.

KEYWORDS: women's voting preferences, political leadership, gender politics, media election campaigns, Julia Gillard, 2010 Federal Election, Australia.

Why do Women Vote for Women: An exploration of decision criteria in the Australian 2010 Federal Election

The 2010 Federal Election in Australia was marked by a number of unprecedented phenomena with gender undertones: a woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was campaigning for re-election of her party, the Australian Labor Party (ALP); the campaign of the ALP and Gillard avoided making gender an issue; the opposition party, Liberal National Coalition and its leader, Tony Abbott were trying to improve their status on gender issues; and gender was prevalent in the media coverage of the leaders.

The 2010 Federal election occurred in the wake of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party's decision to remove Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who had been in office since December 2006, and elect his deputy, Julia Gillard, to the prime ministership on 24 June 2010. Prime Minister Gillard's announcement for an election came less than a month after the leadership spill with her acknowledging that she had not become Prime Minister (PM) in the context of a general election, and that she now sought 'a mandate from the Australian people to move Australia forward' (Gillard, 2010). Voting for Gillard would mean a vote for the party she leads, the ALP as in the Australian political system, the PM is not elected by direct vote. The male or female leader of the Party that wins the majority in the House of Representatives becomes PM.

The lead up to the election campaign was especially challenging for Gillard despite her becoming Australia's first female Prime Minister (Holmes and Fernandes, 2010). In the context of the media reporting Gillard's ascension to the prime ministership as a 'coup' (Rodgers, 2010) and many Australians regarding her elevation to be 'undemocratic' and engineered by party factional leaders, Gillard had to reinforce her party's credibility, her own legitimacy as Prime Minister and ALP leader, and her credentials to lead. An opinion poll in Rudd's home state of Queensland, revealed that around 75 per cent of respondents said that Rudd had been treated harshly and 'should have been given the chance to lead Labor to the next election' (Kearney and Passmore, 2010).

Gillard sought to establish her prime ministerial credentials by avoiding using gender as the focus of her campaign. While fifty women's groups under the umbrella of the Equality Rights Alliance (ERA), one of the six women's alliances funded by the Rudd Government in 2010 to support policy engagement by women at the national level, were demanding that the 2010

Federal Election specifically address a number of gender equality issues (Sawer, 2011), the ALP did not produce any women's policy publicly during the Campaign. Issues listed by ERA (2010) relating to closing the gender wage gap; increasing representation of women on boards and in leadership positions; improving services to reduce the barriers to women's workforce participation; stopping violence against women; providing housing which is accessible and affordable for all women at all stages of their lives and providing appropriate health services for all women across Australia, were not addressed with any policies from the ALP in the public domain. The only ALP policy, 'Equality for Women' was published unannounced on the ALP website, the day before the election (Sawer, 2011). The 'unofficial' government's message offered by Minister Plibersek, Minister for the Status of Women, was that whilst "it's worth also celebrating that historic time... gender's not the important thing in this equation (Lateline 2010)."

Despite ALP's tactic to disassociate from "gender politics" (Lateline, 2010), it was evident in the media and the polls that Gillard was going to get a lot of votes from women. Labor led 58 to 42 per cent among women, with Gillard holding a 28 point lead amongst women as preferred prime minister (Grattan, 2010). Voting in a female prime minister was reported as resonating well with women (Stewart, 2010).

Opposition leader, Tony Abbott was trying to use gender to attract female voters, to counter his past record on women's issues such as on abortion (Eastley, 2011) and sexuality and marriage (Maiden, 2010; Coslovich, 2010). In an effort to improve their status on gender issues, Abbott appeared to be going against the Coalition's support base in proposing a Paid Parental Leave (Lunn, 2010) that was criticized by the party's former Treasurer Peter Costello for the increase in company tax (1.5% levy) that would fund it (Curtis, 2010). Abbott, who as a Howard government minister had opposed a paid parental leave scheme, was now proposing one that was more generous to families than the ALP's who had already legislated to give families 18 weeks paid leave at the national minimum wage, commencing in January, 2011. Abbott proposed to give mothers 26 weeks paid parental leave at full replacement wage up to a maximum salary of \$150,000 a year including superannuation.

Undercutting these attempts, however, a 'jock' culture appeared to be permeating the Coalition's approach to women (Holmes and Fernandes, 2010.) Comments such as 'Wayne Swan is to budget surpluses what Paris Hilton is to celibacy' made by Shadow Treasurer Joe

Hockey during a radio interview on 20 July 2010 (Faine, 2010) and Abbott's response to a journalist's question about debating Gillard with the remark: 'Are you suggesting to me that when it comes from Julia "no" doesn't mean "no"?' (Associated Australian Press, 2010a), reinforced Abbott's and the Coalition's negative view of women and women's issues. Abbott responded by talking about the strong women in his life and the strong women in his party in a Western Australian speech (Associated Australian Press, 2010b)

Media scrutiny of Gillard was sexist through out the election campaign (Sawer, 2011). Reference to Gillard's physical attributes including her hair, clothes (Power, 2010; Freedman, 2010) and voice (Drape, 2010) were negative (Connolly, 2010). Her de facto relationship and child-free status (Farnsworth, 2010) were also raised in the context of her suitability for the position. While the media portrayed leaks of Gillard's questioning of the paid parental leave scheme as evidence of her lack of support for women, it appeared that political pragmatism in terms of the financial viability of the paid parental leave scheme was to be put aside because a woman was behind the decision (Cox, 2010).

In Australia, voting is compulsory, so the issue that pervaded the media was not whether people would vote but who would they vote for. Given that for the first time, there was a woman leading the ALP, there was much speculation in the media, politics and in the community about how women would vote on 21 August 2010. What Gillard had done for her sex, how women would support Gillard in 'sisterhood' (Gordon 2010), that Gillard's gender gives her an 'unfair advantage' (Gordon 2010) and that one wouldn't vote for a male politician just because he is a man (O'Brien 2010; Elwood 2010) were some of the common media themes.

Polls such as those of Newspoll and The Australian (2010) and Nielsen (2010) showed a large gender gap in the approval for Abbott than of Gillard and this gender gap increased during the campaign, suggesting that contrary to expectations, it was Abbott who had the problem of managing gender (Sawer, 2011). In the first poll taken since the televised Leader's Debate on 25 July 2010, the ALP had a 6 point lead. Analysis by gender (Roy Morgan, 2010a) showed that a clear gender gap still existed with the ALP leading by 16 points among women (ALP 58% L-NP 42%) while among men, the Liberal National Coalition were 3 points ahead (L-NP 51.5% cf. ALP 48.5%).

Against this backdrop, a pre-election study of voting choices of women was conducted to examine how women would vote in the 2010 Australian Federal Election and the factors which were influencing their vote. The study commenced after the televised national Leader's Debate as both major parties released more policies critiquing each other and former PM Kevin Rudd came in to centre stage on 7 August 2010 to campaign.

Methodology

The study aimed to find how women would vote in the 2010 federal election and what was influencing their vote for Gillard, if they chose to vote for her. The study involved surveying women who were members of an online not-for-profit virtual Centre, Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW) that focused on leadership and women through various avenues such as the online publication of interviews with women and men leaders about their achievements, national leadership awards for women, research and reviews on women's issues in the workplace. The Centre only operated virtually. As such there were no face-to-face meetings with members. Members of the Centre were already in positions of leadership as noted in their nominal registration details. They also represented a cross section of age and industry. Prior to this study, no commentaries or articles were emailed to the participants or published that related to Gillard and her prime ministership.

The online survey operated from 5 August 2010 to 11 August 2010 which were weeks three and four of the 2010 federal election campaign that had commenced on 17 July 2010 and would conclude on 21 August 2010. The survey concluded a week before the day of the election.

600 Members were randomly selected from the Centre's database and emailed a generic email invitation to take part in the web survey. The email contained a link to the survey page and a common code to enter if they wanted to participate. This code would maintain the study's sampling so that no one else could access the online survey. All participants were provided the same code thus assuring anonymity. There had been no personal contact with the sample. The researcher, who is the Director of this Centre and the author of this study, had never met the participants. No incentives were provided for participation in the survey other than participants getting a summary of the findings. Participants were not asked to provide any details about their identity except their age and country of origin.

Issues canvassed within the two sets of variables, how women would vote and what was influencing their vote for Gillard, if they chose to vote for her, were:

1. Candidate evaluation in terms of position, influence, issues, leadership style and achievements:

- If women did vote for the Gillard Government, was it because Gillard was the first woman PM in Australia; her views and priorities; her leadership style; her achievements or because it was believed she would do more for women's issues if elected?
- Which policies were influencing women's vote?

2. Candidate portrayal in the media:

- In terms of the overall media coverage of Gillard, did women see the primary focus of the media portrayal of Gillard as a political leader or Gillard as a woman?
- Did women regard the overall media coverage of Gillard in the election campaign as being fair or biased on gender grounds?
- If women regarded the media coverage of Gillard as biased, was it because of negative comments such as criticisms of her appearance (clothes, hair etc); physical attributes; personality; marital status or having no children? Or was it because such comments focused on Gillard as a woman rather than as a political candidate?

There were other elements in the media coverage which were neither gender-biased nor political, e.g. religious belief/non-belief, education, background and accent. However this survey focused on gender-related aspects.

Responses to the survey were collated and analysed using Content Analysis and Descriptive Statistical Analysis.

Results

Participants

The response to the survey was 119 women which was a response rate of 19.8 percent. As can be seen in Figure 1, of the 119 participants, the predominant age group was 41-50 years with 35 percent being in this age group, followed by 30 percent being in the 51-60 age group and then 15 percent in the 31-40 age group. There were 14 percent in the 61+ age group and 3 percent in the 20-30 age group.

In terms of occupation, 23 percent were in management and 12 percent were in Education and in the Public Service and a wider variety of other occupations as can be seen in Figure 2. The participants were not representative of different positions within the occupations as most were in higher levels of the organisation. As can be seen in Figure 3, 61 percent were managers. 8 percent were academics and business owners. 9 percent were unknown.

Candidate Evaluation

a) First woman PM in Australia

22 percent said that Julia Gillard being the First woman PM in Australia would influence their vote strongly; 31 percent of women said that this criterion would partly influence them and 11 percent said it would influence them a little. So on the positive side, totalling the above percentages, 64 percent of the participants would be influenced by this criterion. 26 percent indicated they would not be influenced by this criterion in the survey as shown in Figure 4.

b) Gillard' views and priorities

As can be seen in Figure 5, 60 percent of the participants said that Gillard' views and priorities would influence their vote strongly; 21 percent of women said that this criterion would partly influence them and 3 percent said it would influence them a little. In summary, totalling the above percentages, 84 percent of the participants indicated that they would be influenced by this criterion. 6 percent indicated they would not be.

c) Gillard's leadership style

34 percent said that Gillard's leadership style would influence their vote strongly; 29 percent of women said that that this criterion would partly influence them and 15 percent said it would influence their vote a little. So on the positive side, totalling the above percentages, 78 percent

of the participants would be influenced by this criterion and 10 percent indicated they would not be as shown in Figure 6.

d) Gillard's achievements

28 percent said that this criterion would influence their vote strongly; 33 percent of women said that this criterion would partly influence them and 13 percent said it would influence their vote a little. So on the positive side, totalling the above percentages, 74 percent of women would be influenced by this criterion and 15 percent indicated they would not be as shown in Figure 7.

e) Gillard will do more for women's issues if elected

In terms of whether Gillard will do more for women's issues if elected, Figure 8 shows that 9 percent said that this criterion would influence their vote strongly; 34 percent of women said that this criterion would partly influence their vote and 21 percent said it would influence their vote a little. So on the positive side 64 percent of women would be influenced by this criterion and 25 percent indicated they would not be.

Summation of criteria influencing vote for Gillard

To summarise at this point, Table 1 and 2 elucidates the positive and negative influences of the 5 criteria collectively as a percentage sum total and individually. Table 2 also shows the ranking of each criterion according to the percentage of women influenced by them and the percentage of women not influenced by them.

As can be seen in Table 2 'Gillard's views and priorities' was the highest ranking criterion that was influencing women's vote for Gillard with 84 percent of participants indicating this. Gillard's gender in being the 'first woman PM in Australia' was the highest ranking criteria that was *not* influencing women's vote for Gillard.

Other factors Influencing Votes for Gillard or Abbott

In relation to the other reasons which participants suggested as those that would influence their vote for Gillard or Abbott, Table 3 categorises the criterion using simple aggregation to calculate the total mentions of each voting criterion stated by the respondents.

Based on Table 3, it can be seen there are more factors influencing votes for Gillard than against Gillard. A dislike of Tony Abbott, his attitudes towards women and what he represents ranked as the highest factor 32 percent of the comments relating to this theme. Next were the policies of the ALP with 27 percent of the comments, followed equally with 11 percent of comments indicating that the achievements of the ALP were impressive, and that Gillard's personal qualities as a leader and a professional were impressive.

Policies Influencing vote for the Gillard Government

65 percent of participants alluded to their interest in the policy platforms of the ALP as influencing their vote for Gillard. Several policies including education, climate change, immigration, same-sex marriage, economic management, health, small business, taxation and social inclusion were canvassed. When participants were asked to specifically name the policies that would influence their vote for the Gillard Government, 42 women out of 119 did not respond to this question. Of the 77 women who did respond, education was named the most with 28 references to it. Health care was second with 20 references and employment third with 16 references. There were in comparison 11 references to climate change and social justice. Other ALP policies such as family, social justice, asylum seekers and the economy were rarely mentioned.

Media coverage of Julia Gillard

In terms of the overall media coverage of Julia Gillard, 52 percent of the participants perceived the media coverage of Gillard as focussing on her as a woman. 43 percent of women perceived the coverage as focussing on her as a political leader. 5 percent did not respond.

When the women participants were asked if they regarded the overall media coverage of Julia Gillard in the election campaign as being fair or biased on gender grounds. 60 percent of women perceived that the media coverage of Gillard was biased because she is a woman while 36 percent of women perceived that the media coverage was fair on gender grounds. 4 percent did not respond.

48 percent of the participants selected a variety of reasons for the bias in the media coverage as shown in Figure 9.

Below is a ranking of the reasons suggested according to the percentage of women who indicated it as a bias in the media coverage of Gillard.

1. Attention on Gillard as a woman rather than a political candidate (16%)
2. Attention on Gillard's appearance (clothes, hair etc) (13%)
3. Attention on Gillard's marital status (8%)
4. Attention on Gillard having no children (7%)
5. Attention on Gillard's personality (5%)
6. Attention on Gillard's physical attributes (0%)

Discussion

It is evident from this study that women leaders who are in the upper echelons of a cross section of occupations and ages did, in the majority, choose to vote for Gillard in the Australian 2010 federal election and do so not because of her gender, but because of her vision, policy, leadership style and achievements. This is an interesting finding because it goes against the speculation that was occurring in the media, politics and in the community that given that for the first time, there was a woman leading the ALP, women would vote for Gillard because of her gender.

Although the findings showed that in this cohort of women, Gillard's gender was not influencing their votes first and foremost prior to the election, it is evident that gender was a factor in the election as it was rated as a significant influence with 64 percent of participants voting for Gillard because she is the first woman PM in Australia and because they believed that she would do more for women's issues if elected. As women celebrated the achievement of the highest public office, they also anticipated that Gillard would address women's issues.

There is a great deal of general support for this study's finding of the significance of gender in influencing women's vote, though other studies also consider comparisons between men and women's voting behaviour in relation to gender. Stambough and O'Reagan (2003) cite a number of studies (Lake and Breglio, 1992; Lewis and Verva, 1994; Cook, 1994) which show that gender is influential when it is used as a voting cue when voters have insufficient information about candidates during elections other than simple cues such as party identification and gender. Kosiara-Pedersen (2011) found that her findings supported the

hypothesis that women are more sympathetic to woman party leaders than men and that the characteristics of the party leader which they focused on were not different to those emphasized by men. Denmark et al. (2011 cited by Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011) also found that the woman party leader in Australia's 2010 election was scored higher by women. Tranter (2011) found that many women were inspired by the novelty of electing a female prime minister in the 2010 Australian election, more so than male voters. Banducci and Karp (2000) tested their gender identity hypothesis for party leaders in parliamentary elections in Australia (1996), Britain (1979, 1987), Canada (1993) and New Zealand (1996). Their analysis showed that although gender is only one of the factors determining party choice of women and men, gender is related to vote choice when the leader of the party is a woman, even when controlling for party identification. Zipp and Plutzer's (1985) study of voting behaviour in five US elections found that women vote for women if the woman candidate is identified as supporting issues which are important to women. In line with previous research showing social welfare policies being favoured by women voters, this study found that education, then health care, climate change and social justice were policies which women were most interested in.

Whilst in-group favouritism (Smith and Fox, 2001) could have contributed to women planning to vote for Gillard because of her gender, gender is also apparent in women's appraisal of the Opposition leader, Abbott. Despite Abbott trying to manage perceptions of valuing gender, women appeared to be choosing Gillard over Abbott because of their dislike of him, his position on women's issues and what he represents. The Rudd/Gillard's leadership spill and the notion that the ALP was run by "faceless men" (Kelton 2010) did not emerge as a significant factor influencing women's votes in this study.

As to women's leadership evaluations of the party leader influencing their vote choice to a greater extent than the gender of the party leader, there are not many studies which support this finding. Denmark et al. (2011 cited by Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011) found that in the 2010 Australian federal election, the woman party leader did have some impact on the political interest and efficacy of women among the electorate. However, Banducci and Karp (2000) showed that the effects of gender are not dependent on leadership evaluations even though women give higher evaluations than men for women leaders.

Whilst it is known that this study's sample only comprised women who were in positions of leadership, a characteristic that was not used as a selection criteria in other studies for women participants, more research would need to be done to ascertain if women who are in leadership positions regard other women leaders differently to women who are not in leadership positions. In relation to this study's cohort of women leaders, evaluation of the party leader in terms of position, influence, issues, leadership style and achievements does matter more than gender. The criterion which had the strongest influence was Gillard's views and priorities, followed by her leadership style and achievements. However, whilst policies of the ALP were mentioned, it was only done so nominally lacking any thorough evaluation. Statements about ALP ideology, ALP policy values and achievements were also generalized. A large non-response rate of 64 percent choosing not to identify a policy that influenced them indicates that women were still not aligned to any particular policy as the close of the election campaign approached.

In relation to this study's participants, women believed that the primary focus of the overall media portrayal of Gillard focused on her 'as a woman.' Although there was not an overwhelming majority claiming this (52 percent versus 43 percent indicating that the media portrayal focused on her 'as a political leader,') a majority of women (60 percent) perceived the overall media coverage of Gillard to be 'biased because she is a woman', with only 36 percent indicating that the media coverage was fair on gender grounds. Women identified the media's attention on Gillard 'as a woman' rather than 'a political candidate' as the basis for believing that the media was biased. It was perceived that the media coverage of Gillard focused to varying degrees on either one or more traditional gender stereotypes of being a woman, her appearance, marital status, having no children and her personality. Despite a perceived gender biased media coverage, it would appear that in this cohort of women, Gillard's views, priorities, leadership style and achievements ranked as higher considerations than her being first PM and the possibility that she will do more if elected.

It would appear that whilst a meritorious assessment was being used in this cohort of women to assess the candidacy of Gillard, a personal subjective assessment was evident in the participant's assessment of Abbott in their dislike of him. Moreover, in their considering what Abbott represented in the context of his policies, women in this cohort were worried about what he would be like if elected. Further investigation would be required to see if differences in perceived media portrayal of Gillard and Abbott contributed to these differences in assessment.

Although this study conducted in the midst of the 2010 election campaign demonstrated that in terms of how women leaders would vote, Gillard and the ALP would win the election on a two party preferred vote and gain more later preferences than the Liberal National Coalition, the federal election results with a loss of a large proportion of Labor seats in Queensland and New South Wales, leaving both major parties short of a majority for the first time since World War II (Rodgers 2010) was unexpected. Although, the ALP and the Liberal National Coalition each won 72 seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives, this was a relatively poor result for the ALP government that had only served one term. Having lost 11 seats, the ALP remained four short of the requirement for majority government. Today, crossbenchers hold the balance of power, not the ALP.

There are limitations in this study. The small sample size of 119 participants was not a statistically representative sample. It also comprised women who were in positions of leadership. Moreover, as the data was self-reported, it is difficult to validate the accuracy of the data as participants may have been reporting what they wanted the researcher to hear (Cook and Campbell 1979). Participants might not want to admit voting for Tony Abbott rather than a candidate of their own sex. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the participants' voting behaviour in the ballot box reflected their pre-election positions. Having a random sample for this study and a higher participation rate would have added to the validity of this study, as well as further research comparing how Abbott was portrayed in the media in the 2010 federal election campaign and how men would vote for the party leaders.

Conclusion

Given that Australian federal elections for the last three decades (Leigh 2005; Pietsch, Graetz and McAllister 2010; Studlar, McAllister and Hayes 1998 cited by Tranter, 2011) has not demonstrated the significant influence of gender on voting behaviour, other than identifying that women traditionally have voted for conservative parties, this study is important as it is based in a unique time in Australia's political history which led to a woman being elected PM of a minority government and it explores how women in leadership perceived and reacted to the electoral environment at the time.

Although this study is small and unrepresentative, in relation to the study's participants, it is evident that the gender of a party leader does matter, but more importantly is the leadership of the leader. Whilst the 2010 electoral climate was dominated by gender politics with Gillard running for the highest office in Australia, women of different ages who were in the upper echelons of a range of occupations were more willing to vote for a woman because of her vision, policy, leadership style and achievements rather than her sex. It would also seem that these women used different criteria to judge Gillard and Abbott. It will be interesting to see the decision criteria women use to decide to vote for or against Gillard and the media's portrayal of her and Abbott in the upcoming 2013 federal election.

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